

# OXFORD

## MAGAZINE

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No. 455 Eighth Week Trinity Term 2023

At the end of another academic year this seems an appropriate moment to stand back and consider what might await us and what we might hope for in the next. The financial situation is likely to dominate everybody's thinking; e.g. the effects of inflation on every university's balance sheet in the face of fixed tuition fees and in the case of post-1992 universities increased pension contributions, threatened insolvency (on some estimates half of UK Higher Education Institutions are at risk), students increasingly unable to afford rents and living expenses while facing rising re-payment rates on their student loans. With the next election already driving political positioning, echoing the disastrous renegeing of promises by the LibDems in 2010, Labour has abandoned its manifesto policy of abolishing the tuition fee payment system, but, as the probable next government, appears to offer no alternative.

Regardless of who is running the country, problems such as the progressive erosion of the value of tuition fee income, the pressure on overseas recruitment (the meat and drink of many UK institutions), and threats to post-graduate numbers, will not go away soon. Oxford and its colleges are, to an extent, protected by legacy wealth and philanthropy, but it is widely accepted that the funding model for the sector, post-Browne report, is fundamentally broken.

As has happened with several earlier reforms at election time (Dearing in 1997, Browne in 2010) it seems quite likely that a new review of the HE sector will soon be proposed, in a quasi-bipartisan strategy in which the outgoing government deflects responsibility for the mistakes of the past and the incoming government, in accepting the conclusions of the review, does not

## THE IMPENDING SHAKEDOWN

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itself have to struggle to design the new policy. We are still awaiting the implementation, or the abandonment, of the recommendations of the Augar review of 2019. Given the mounting dissatisfaction with the Office for Students (barely six years-old) it could, and should, be included in the next review.

A cursory contemplation of the present state of academe turns up some remarkable developments, which already set some of the parameters for future reforms. We now have a Freedom of Speech Tsar in the OfS, Arif Ahmed. Reportedly on a salary of around £100,000 he has had to resign his post as Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge. One can earnestly hope that his motives in this unusual career progression prioritise the application of academic values to the "culture wars" as well as clear-minded philosophical sophistication in the use of evidence and argument. He will certainly need our full support.

He may well be glad to leave Caius behind him given, as the *Guardian* (1st June, 2023) reported, the belief among some Caius Fellows is that "Cambridge is succumbing to the woke virus", with the result that Fellows are making formal complaints against each other in the wake of divisions over eugenics and the history of slavery. Although Cambridge seems these days to be the subject of unwelcome headlines more regularly than Oxford, we cannot afford to be self-satisfied or complacent. Luck or better PR management only protects us so far. As we have often pointed out, as a result of its governance structures Cambridge is more open as regards its decision making than secretive Oxford.

In this issue, Gill Evans analyses the University of Cambridge's approach to the potential "emergency" caused

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## INSIDE

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...and much more

by the UCU marking and assessment boycott (MAB). On 22 May, the University and its local UCU branch issued a joint statement, expressing “regret” at the stalling of negotiations and the potential impact that this would have on students at Cambridge and more widely. For many, this was an important move, and sets Cambridge apart from those universities that have taken an aggressive approach, including salary deductions or threats of total pay docking – in effect declaring a lockout. The University of Edinburgh announced steps to “mitigate” the effects of the MAB, as well as an offer to individual staff to remove themselves from industrial action, but has been widely criticised for the perceived threat to academic standards.

Oxford, meanwhile, has remained relatively quiet on the matter, with no recent public statement, nothing obvious on the University website, and relatively sparse internal communications. An internal-facing HR webpage talks of “contingency planning” and the possibility of reallocating work in some circumstances. In practice, departments can do a number of things: find non-union or non-boycotting staff to mark exams; replace double marking with single marking and moderation, or just single marking; ask non-specialists to mark, including non-contracted staff or externals; or attempt to classify students on the basis of marks already achieved, for example in coursework or dissertations.

A quirk of Oxford is that examining (or assessing) is paid additionally to salary; not everyone examines in a given year. Sections of social media – “Legal Twitter” – are rife with interpretations of the relevant law that suggests not marking is a breach of contract and so potential grounds for non-payment of salary. But for many who work here, this is a relatively cheap form of strike, and there is little pressure that the institution can put on individuals to break step with their union. Conversely, Oxford is less unionised than other UK institutions, and unionisation is patchy: hence, perhaps, what might seem a more relaxed attitude on the part of Divisions and departments.

None of the mitigations, however, is without potential problems. What is more, they overlook a big unknown: while some colleagues may have told administrators or senior examiners that they are not marking, until pre-Exam Board meetings it is impossible to know the extent of the problem, which leaves little time for an alternative, in particular given the recent move towards summer graduation close to publication of results. The University has the recent experience of, in effect, cancelling Prelims/Mods, but it is hard to see this as an acceptable Plan B for Finals (or for graduate students, particularly those on one-year taught Masters courses). The temptation of an appeal, or even going to law, for a student not achieving the highest class, on the basis only of a reduced range of marks, or papers marked by substitutes, will be strong. What happens, too, to students holding offers of employment or postgraduate study conditional on degree result?

There is further local context. Under Professor Dame Louise Richardson, Oxford granted two *ex-gratia* payments to many staff, recognising difficulties occasioned by the pandemic and the ongoing “cost-of-living crisis”. The current Vice-Chancellor has made improving pay and working conditions a headline policy. A “Pay and Conditions Report” Steering Group has been tasked with carrying out “a comprehensive review of the total reward and benefits offer for all staff groups across the University.” This was the main focus of an extraor-

dinarily well-attended recent staff Q&A. But as one colleague present noted, the same slides have been in circulation now for over a year, with no more money in anyone’s pay-packet. The more cynical will see the remit of the Steering Group’s nine objectives, three mentions of benchmarking, and a composition of 11 members but without representation of “chalkface” academics, UCU, or precarious staff as inherently narrow and fear institutional inertia that even the most dynamic and well-intentioned leadership cannot shift.

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Meanwhile and more pressingly, Oxford is potentially due for another “strategic review”, the previous one having been extended for a year due to Covid. The last one was vastly over-ambitious and, as we argued at the time, only got under the wire because of the general indifference of staff, based on previous experience, to such exercises. Targets have apparently been scaled back and the only entirely clear result has been Reuben College. Any new setting of future policy aims and targets must surely start with an honest and open account of the outcome of the previous process.

Local measures – an “Oxford weighting,” for example – would do much to alleviate the financial and other difficulties that staff face. So too would action on precarious employment, as called for by the recent open letter published in these pages (*Oxford Magazine*, No. 454, 5th Week, TT 2023). Teaching and research in Oxford rely on a reserve army of poorly paid, temporary workers who deserve better from their employers. Improvements would reduce the possibility of future rounds of industrial action.

Future fundraising needs to be directed, not to new buildings, but to attracting and supporting the most talented graduate students, while also improving the working conditions of staff. Recruitment and retention must be the priority. How about relieving tutors of part of their teaching stints by employing postgraduates to share their teaching? How about providing all academics with personal secretarial help as of right?

If one attempts to take the broadest view of the future one has to face the reality that Oxford’s options for change are inevitably much constrained by external forces. Casualisation and the problem of fixed term contracts can only be solved by reforms of research council funding. Systematic reduction of the burdens of audit and regulation can only be solved by returning the OfS to the role of neutral buffer between universities and the government (the Haldane principle) as applied in the days of the University Grants Committee. The redirection of many of today’s aspiring university applicants towards more appropriate, Auger-style, career preparation and skill-training is in the hands of the politicians.

But what Oxford can nonetheless do is set an example and campaign, taking full advantage of its exceptional public influence. It must openly demonstrate its governance according to democratic principles (which will require Congregation reform) and it must defend the principle of promoting talent even if this appears elitist. The secret of Oxford’s enduring success lies in the quality of its students and it is this above all that creates, attracts and retains the most gifted staff.

B.B., T.J.H



# Reminders



## Update on proposals to abolish the EJRA in Cambridge

Cambridge's consideration of the future of its EJRA was given new impetus by the call for a Discussion on a Topic of Concern on Forced Retirement held on 24 January and published in the *Reporter* on 1 February. The Discussion attracted more than two dozen speakers, most calling for an end to the EJRA.

*'Oxford and Cambridge were the only universities in England to introduce an EJRA for academic staff. Our scheme was intended by the then Registry to give us a few years' breathing space to deliberate a career-long performance management system; we rejected that, but the EJRA stuck. It was copied by Oxford, and justified at both places with claims that it would increase gender equality, promote inter-generational fairness, produce career opportunities for younger academics and improve the age structure of the workforce. Cambridge added innovation and academic freedom to the list of excuses, and pivoted to push the EJRA as the only alternative to career-long performance management. After a consultation in May 2011 and a Report in December 2011, there was a Discussion in January 2012, after which a majority of us voted for the policy.'*

*'When the EJRA was reviewed in 2016, I was an elected member of the Council. We were assured that academics who wanted to stay on – and could raise money to pay their salaries – would be able to continue as contract staff. But academics soon started finding that we were not allowed to apply for research grants or contracts that would run past our scheduled retirement date.'*

(Ross Anderson opening the Discussion)

The Council responded to the Discussion in the *Reporter* of 22 February with an undertaking that there would be a Review:

*'A review in 2015–16 concluded that the Employer Justified Retirement Age (EJRA) of 67 should be maintained. A further review planned for 2019–20 was delayed by the Covid19 pandemic, but is now scheduled to take place in 2023. The Council and the General Board have established a Retirement Policy and EJRA Review Group to conduct the review, which will consider: 1. the operation of the University's current Employer Justified Retirement Age, to determine whether it has been successful in meeting its aims; and 2. the terms of the University's current Retirement Policy, to establish whether they remain fit for purpose. The Review Group will consult with the University community during the review, including in connection with any proposed recommendations to change the current arrangements.'*

The Remit of the Group, established by the Human Resources Committee, was:

*1.1.1 to review the operation of the current Employer Justified Retirement Age (EJRA) to determine whether it has been successful in meeting its aims, which are to: - ensure inter-generational fairness and career progression; - enable effective succession-planning; - promote innovation in research and*

*knowledge creation; and - preserve academic autonomy and freedom;*

*1.1.2 to review the terms of the current Retirement Policy to establish whether they remain fit for purpose;*

*1.1.3 to seek the views of the University community on the current arrangements and any proposed changes;*

*1.1.4 to report on its findings, including any recommendations for change, where appropriate.<sup>1</sup>*

The membership was listed as two members of the Council; Heads of the three Schools (=Divisions); the Head of a non-School institution; the Academic Secretary; the Chair of the Committee of Colleges; five members of the Regent House; a representative of Cambridge UCU, Unite and Unison; two representatives of the 'post-doc community' and a retired academic.

The Terms of Reference included the statement that:

*'The University currently operates an EJRA for University officers only, which is at the end of the academic year (30 September) in which the officer reaches the age of 67. The University does not operate a retirement age for assistant, unestablished research, unestablished academic-related and unestablished academic members of staff.'*

University Officers in Cambridge have the protection of its Statute C, and especially the Schedule to Statute C, which preserves largely unchanged Cambridge's version of the Model Statute (counterpart to Oxford's Statute XII before the changes approved in 2017)

The EJRA is authorised by Special Ordinance C (ii), 12:

*'Subject to the provisions of Statute C and any Special Ordinance made under Statute C, a University officer shall be entitled, unless the tenure of her or his office is limited in accordance with the provisions of any other Statute or Ordinance or by Grace, to hold office until the retiring age so long as he or she satisfactorily performs the duties of the office. All University officers (other than the Chancellor, the High Steward, the Deputy High Steward, the Commissary, and any University officer who is exempted under any Statute or Special Ordinance from the provisions of this section) shall vacate their offices not later than the end of the academic year in which they attain the age of sixty seven years.'*

This means that changes would require approval of a Grace by the Regent House. Nevertheless (misleadingly?) the Human Resources website asserts that:

*'The Human Resources (HR) Committee may amend this policy as appropriate to ensure its compliance with legislation and to maintain an effective set of procedures.'<sup>2</sup>*

There has as yet been no active consultation by the

Review Group. However at its meeting of 15 March the General Board considered a proposal from a concerned group of Regent House members that the EJRA should be suspended until the Review Group had reported and a decision might be made by the Regent House to end the EJRA altogether. Its Minute noted:

*‘The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for University Community and Engagement introduced the report. At a Discussion on 24 January 2023 relating to the topic of concern on forced retirement, three speakers requested that the operation of the EJRA be suspended pending the outcome of the aforementioned review. The report proposed a draft response stating that the Council believed that it would be premature to suspend the operation of the EJRA before prior to completion of the review which would include a consultation with the wider University community. It was further noted that it was not within the power of the Council to suspend the EJRA. The Board, for its part, recommended the draft response to the Council.’<sup>3</sup>*

The Council recognised that it did not have the power to suspend the EJRA which would indeed need a Report,

Discussion and Grace. It considered that suspending the EJRA would in any case create a ‘risk of acting unfairly in respect of those employees who were nearing retirement age’. It noted that ‘some staff had not been given two years’ notice of forced retirement, as required by the University’s Retirement Policy’. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (University Community and Engagement) ‘agreed to investigate this claim’. Nothing is yet known of any recognised implications of this investigation for individuals to whom this applied. About 30 University Officers are therefore to be dismissed on 30 September.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/retirement\\_policy\\_and\\_ejra\\_review\\_group.pdf](https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/retirement_policy_and_ejra_review_group.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/retirement\\_policy\\_2019\\_final\\_updated\\_2021.pdf](https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/retirement_policy_2019_final_updated_2021.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.governance.cam.ac.uk/committees/general-board/2023-03-15/MeetingDocuments/Confirmed%20Unreserved%20General%20Board%20Minutes%20-%2015%20>

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# Coping with ‘emergencies’

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G.R.EVANS

## *The Covid-19 Emergency of 2020-1*

During the Covid-19 crisis Oxford and Cambridge were both forced into constitutional anomalies while it was impossible to conduct business in the usual way. Oxford created Gold and Bronze teams which kept detailed Minutes which were eventually made available on request (behind SSO). In their Annual Oration Oxford’s Proctors had something to say about ‘the implementation of rapid, sweeping changes’, highlighting ‘the importance of robust scrutiny and governance procedures’. They said what had happened needed ‘to be revisited once the pressures of the academic year are behind us’.<sup>1</sup>

In Cambridge the emergency ‘Teams’ were Gold and Silver. Their Minutes were limited and disclosed in part only in response to an FOI request. The Cambridge Council later explained that the Gold Team had ‘set up’ additional Taskforces ‘to advise it on operational matters’.<sup>2</sup> In 16 March 2020 a Council meeting had minuted the intention that ‘this was to be a temporary delegation until the next ordinary Council meeting’. At its next meeting on 6 April, ‘the Vice-Chancellor emphasised that the COVID-19 Gold team and the task forces would only deal with urgent, COVID-19 related matters’. But by 21 April there was a ‘Crimson Recovery Taskforce’ looking far beyond that. There was now to be a ‘Crimson Phase’ according to an Update from the Vice-Chancellor.<sup>3</sup>

A *Recovery Programme*, the work of the ‘Crimson Taskforce’, was published in the *Reporter* of 29 July, 2020 but only by means of a link to a set of slides.<sup>4</sup> There was never a *Report* to the University to prompt a Regent House Discussion, only a Notice in the *Reporter* of 24 March, 2021 stating that the Council had approved it, with its thirteen ‘projects’. None of those were to tackle the questions raised by the suspension of normal governance. On 21 April 2021 the *Reporter* carried another Notice, in response to the request of the Board of Scrutiny in its 25<sup>th</sup> *Report*, seeking more information. The *Recovery Programme* was allowed a Discussion in May.<sup>5</sup> The Registry ‘reported that the Gold Team would decide at its meeting later in the week whether to move the University to a new response phase in light of the lockdown’. The Gold Team meeting under Emergency Management was still taking the top-level decisions.

This emphasis on ‘Recovery’ disregarded the extent of the ‘emergency’ suspension of normal governance in Cambridge in the Covid-19 period. Normal weekly publication of the *Reporter* had abruptly ceased after 18 March, 2020, with only one issue in April, one in May and (after protest by the Board of Scrutiny), two in June, then one in July and one in August before regular publication resumed in the new academic year.

The Board of Scrutiny’s constitutional concerns, eventually prompted the Council to call a Topic of Concern Discussion for mid-July 2020 and a *Reporter* was eventually published on 17 June 2020 to announce it and to

make a *Statement on key principles for the delivery of education*. It also published a list of the ‘decisions’ which had been taken ‘on student-related matters’, though without reference to the Regent House.

At the Discussion on 14 July the Chair of the Board of Scrutiny asked for publication of an edition of the *Reporter* within two weeks, ‘informing the Regent House of the timetable for reverting to the University’s governance procedures’, for ‘in effect, the University’s principal governing body has been divested of its role in the decision-making process’. Moreover, he said, ‘the breaches in the University’s governance procedures with respect to the rights of the Regent House will need to be revisited and provisions put in place to navigate such circumstances in the future’. The Board of Scrutiny also pressed the need for a radical rethink of arrangements applicable in a constitutional emergency in its 26<sup>th</sup> *Report* in October 2021, referring there to the concerns it had already expressed in its previous *Report*.<sup>6</sup> Another speaker in the Discussion pointed out that ‘the *Statutes and Ordinances* do not provide measures for responding to an emergency’. ‘No amount of informal updates from the Vice-Chancellor, conveying decisions and reassurance, can substitute for a publication of record ‘Published by Authority’ with a readership of over 10,000.’ These and the other remarks made at that Discussion were published in a big catch-up *Reporter* on 29 July.

Council was slow to respond to the Discussion but it acknowledged a year later (*Reporter*, 21 July, 2021) that the ‘emergency’ governance changes needed review and that thought ought to be given to ‘preparations for dealing with a future emergency’:

*‘The Council considers it important to put in place formally a scheme governing strategic decision-making in a crisis situation (as opposed to the operational decision-making covered by the emergency planning framework).’*

This was to be put before the Regent House for approval:

*‘Advance approval of this scheme by the Regent House would provide certainty as to who has authority to make decisions and would confirm how those matters would be reported to the Regent House. The Council sees this framework as a pragmatic solution to many of the points raised by the contributors.’*

It would have clear value if:

*‘During an emergency, the scheme would bridge the gap between the highlighted concerns about transparency of decision-making and accountability to the Regent House and the Council’s need for a more agile decision-making process that is capable of providing an authoritative response within a short timeframe. A Report proposing that framework is expected to be published in the Michaelmas Term.’*

This is still awaited. Indeed the Emergency Action Plan Template dated 2018 is due to be replaced only this Term.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile the *Recovery Programme* was to continue. An ‘overview’ of that was published in the *Reporter* of 21 April, 2021. Remarks on the continuing suspension of emergency arrangements were made in a Discussion about it in May.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Examinations and Assessment Emergency of 2023*

Have lessons been learned from this attempt to handle the Covid-19 emergency? Cambridge still has no constitutionally approved framework for ‘emergencies’ within which the creation of ‘emergency’ arrangements can be said to sit. However, this summer Oxford and Cambridge have both faced the challenge presented by industrial action affecting their normal conduct of final examinations and the consequent permission for the successful to supplicate for their degrees. Behind the rules for the conduct of their degree examinations stand both universities’ Statutes with their subordinate legislation. The *Gazette* publishes changes to Oxford’s Examination Regulations made by Divisional and Faculty Boards. In Cambridge its General Board makes provisions governing examinations by Regulation<sup>9</sup> and a whole chapter of its *Ordinances* is devoted to examinations, with a section on their ‘form and conduct’.<sup>10</sup> The difference is that Graces of the Regent House are needed to approve changes to Ordinances and this summer that has made it necessary to declare an ‘emergency’.

When the normal conduct of examinations was in doubt Oxford made arrangements, beginning with a statement of preliminary intentions on 6 March 2023 including advice on ‘detailing scenarios by which an assessment can be cancelled and what steps need to be taken’<sup>11</sup> and providing fuller plans in due course.<sup>12</sup> In April *Cherwell* ran an article on the decision to cancel oral examinations for Modern Languages finalists, giving details about the explanations which had been provided to show why it was unavoidable and the assurances that no one’s Class would be adversely affected.<sup>13</sup> No need seems to have been felt for ‘emergency’ arrangements.

Cambridge tried to do something similar, but because of the need for Regent House consents it hit a buffer, and without the promised Regent House approved arrangements for running the University in emergencies it has found itself in continuing difficulties. On 15 March the *Reporter* published a *Notice* in response to the ‘potential risk of industrial action that might result in a delay in the publication of lists of candidates who have satisfied the Examiners in particular examinations.’ Faced with the need to vary the Ordinances the Council had to submit ‘Graces to the Regent House for approval’ so as ‘to put in place effective arrangements to manage the impact of such action on students, and where relevant to mitigate that impact, in line with regulatory requirements and to meet obligations under consumer protection law’.

These Graces would have allowed the Registry to act ‘notwithstanding the Ordinances for the Dates of Examinations and for the Approval of Class-lists’, for example to ‘accept and publish a list that has been signed by a majority but not by all of the Examiners present’ and to ‘accept lists that have not been signed by External Examiners where such Examiners have been appointed but

have resigned and it has not been possible to appoint replacements’, also to ‘accept any amended list’ and much more, including allowing Examiners to reconvene to deal with cases where insufficient information had been available to allow them to class a candidate at their meeting.

One of the above Graces was challenged by signatures in favour of an amendment limiting the changes allowed, and another by signatures for a Non Placet, which would trigger a Regent House vote. The *Reporter* of 27 March duly published a Notice of a Ballot. Postal ballots take time, especially with a Vacation intervening. Fly-sheets were circulated and published for the record in the usual way with the Ballot results (*Reporter* of 17 May). The amended Grace was approved and the other was rejected. The motivation of the voters against the Council’s original proposals is reported as having been mixed. Some members of UCU saw the proposed Graces as seeking to undermine industrial action. Others, members of UCU or not, were hostile to anything which seemed to lower academic standards in the University.

The Regent House’s decision is final. A number of Task Forces, some appointed for the purpose, swung into action. A ‘checklist’ of guidance on teaching and assessment which had been issued by the longstanding Industrial Action Task Force on 26 April 2023 was speedily updated on 19 May.<sup>14</sup> This body is listed on a ‘administrative’ website (hosted in admin.cam.uk). It ‘was set up by the Council to ensure a coordinated response to the management and impact of all forms of industrial action at the University of Cambridge’. Its membership consists of eight administrative staff plus the Registry, two Pro-Vice-Chancellors, two members of the Council, a Head of School (= Division), and the Head of a Faculty or Department. It reports to the Human Resources Committee and through that to the Council and meets ‘when required’.<sup>15</sup> Student protest with pictures was reported in *Varsity*, with students inclined to blame UCEA for its nationwide policy prompting the industrial action of Cambridge UCU.<sup>16</sup>

‘Emergency’ action needing extra Task forces was found to be required. Circular letters were sent to students and to staff explaining that an Emergency Examination Task Force had been set up (by the General Board).<sup>17</sup> Its remit was ‘to respond to specific issues and queries from faculties, departments and other bodies as they arise’, referring to the Industrial Action Task Force as necessary. It was to be chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education and include representatives from the Schools, two Senior Tutors and a representative of the Student Union, plus a senior administrator. There was also to be a Marking and Assessment Gold Team, to meet twice a week, which was to provide ‘strategic direction’ as well as advice. This was to be chaired by the acting Vice-Chancellor and attended by the Vice-Chancellor elect, three Pro-Vice-Chancellors, two Heads of House, Heads of Divisions, a Senior Tutor, the Academic Secretary and some of the UAS Directors.<sup>18</sup> It is made clear that the Gold Team and the Emergency Examination Task Force can make no decisions, but they may offer advice. Yet that advice is being relied on as Faculties and Departments make adjustments to normal requirements, though any variation of those requirements seems to be potentially in conflict with the decision of the Regent House not to accept such modification.

## An emergency about graduation?

Though power to grant degrees in England is now dependent on the approval of the Office for Students,<sup>19</sup> early Oxford invented the *gradus* as a means of ensuring that its apprentices could proceed in an orderly way to become, by stages, Masters of Arts, that is Masters of their corporate guild (*universitas*). Cambridge, its first spin-out (as I have heard it wittily described) adopted much the same process. Oxford and Cambridge remain principled custodians of the exercise of their ancient degree-awarding powers though they do so in their different styles when it comes to graduation. In Oxford, at a Congregation, the Vice-Chancellor grants the degree on his or her authority and that of the whole University (*auctoritate mea et totius Universitatis*). The award of degrees is an occasion when Cambridge also holds a ‘Congregation’, in order to enact the *Acta* of its granting of degrees, with the Vice-Chancellor using the shorter formula *auctoritate mihi commissa*.

With nothing quite clear about the examination and assessment Cambridge has now found itself facing another dilemma. While Oxford’s graduands have opportunities to graduate at intervals throughout the year, depending on their colleges (with ten more opportunities this calendar year), Cambridge does things differently. Normally Cambridge undergraduates graduate at General Admission, in a single long weekend of ‘Congregations’ at the end of June. On 26 May this year the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education sent a message to all students. It describes a plan to turn those days into mere ‘celebrations of the end of studies’, because it cannot be certain whether examiners will have completed their decision-making in time for all undergraduates to graduate then. Congregations scheduled for late July are, however, to take place. This seems at best a ragged attempt to tidy up an uncertain situation.

A fuller description was made available online.<sup>20</sup> Varsity expressed student indignation,<sup>21</sup> with more to follow when it was reported that some results might not be known until October.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Oxford like Cambridge has limited provision for dealing with ‘emergencies’ in ways which protect its normal governance. It concentrates on risks to safety arising in ‘incidents’,<sup>23</sup> with emergency action plans for departments and supervision by Estates<sup>24</sup>. It seems to have escaped difficulties comparable with those in Cambridge over this summer’s industrial action on examinations and assessment, but other emergencies needing more comprehensive planning must be possible. Cambridge will perhaps at last set about fulfilling the promise to provide itself with a constitutionally satisfactory system for dealing with its own emergencies.

<sup>1</sup> Supplement (1) *Gazette*, 24 March, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Response of the Council to Discussion of its *Annual Report for 2019-20*, *Reporter*, 29 September, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> URL no longer live.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/cam-only/reporter/2019-20/weekly/6587/6587-RecoveryPlan.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Reporter*, 12 May, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> *Reporter*, 20 October 2021.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.governanceandcompliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/assurance-audit-regulatory-compliance/incident-management-and-business-continuity-planning/incident>

<sup>8</sup> *Reporter*, 12 May.

<sup>9</sup> Statute B, III.

<sup>10</sup> *Statutes and Ordinances*, pp.249ff.

<sup>11</sup> <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/article/industrial-action-impact-on-examinations-and-assessments>

<sup>12</sup> <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/ucu-industrial-action>

<sup>13</sup> <https://cherwell.org/2023/04/20/strike-action-cancels-oral-language-exams-for-finalists/>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.industrialaction.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/checklist\\_for\\_teaching\\_and\\_assessment\\_updated\\_19\\_may.pdf](https://www.industrialaction.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/checklist_for_teaching_and_assessment_updated_19_may.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.industrialaction.admin.cam.ac.uk/industrial-action-task-forces-and-advisory-groups>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/25697>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.industrialaction.admin.cam.ac.uk/news> and <https://www.industrialaction.admin.cam.ac.uk/industrial-action-task-forces-and-advisory-groups>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.industrialaction.admin.cam.ac.uk/industrial-action-task-forces-and-advisory-groups>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/degree-awarding-powers/apply-for-daps/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/25746>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/25737>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.industrialaction.admin.cam.ac.uk/graduation-arrangements-28-june-1-july>

<sup>23</sup> <https://safety.admin.ox.ac.uk/emergency-response>

<sup>24</sup> <https://estates.admin.ox.ac.uk/security-plans>.

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# Kathleen Stock at the Oxford Union

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ROGER TEICHMANN

A couple of Tuesdays ago Kathleen Stock spoke at the Oxford Union, an activist glued her/herself to the podium, the police arrived with solvents, a small crowd chanted outside and the eyes of the world were once again fixed on some shenanigans going on within the hallowed halls of this University. I was one of forty-four signatories to a letter to the *Telegraph* in support of Stock, free speech, etc. A similar letter from the student body garnered about a hundred signatures, as did an anti-Stock letter from academics. A storm in a teacup? By no means.

Stock has said that she didn't feel traumatised by the student protests, nor does she seem pessimistic about the capacity for independent thought of students at large. Having talked on this and similar occasions to intellectually and morally open-minded young people she writes:

*"These students are a largely untapped asset to the project of detoxifying the current discourse around identity politics. Thanks to their relative youth, they tend to be sensitive, curious, idealistic but not fanatical, and genuinely want to understand the world. But they also want to play – with ideas, with jokes, with each other. Many have sufficiently rebellious or anarchic instincts to shrink from blatant attempts to manipulate and guilt-trip them. They are sick of being imprisoned in other people's shame, guilt and paranoia. All we have to do is set them free!"*

What of their elders and betters? In her talk Stock expressed misgivings. This isn't so surprising given how the authorities at her previous university, Sussex, failed to support her when she became the target of a sustained campaign of vilification there. But her worries of course relate to universities in general. The issues here are now very familiar. Even so, I think it worthwhile to separate out some strands, approaching things with an eye to diagnosis.

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When defending free speech it is often important to emphasise that the *contents* of people's beliefs aren't generally relevant to whether they should be allowed to express them in public. There are naturally constraints on what people may say in public: slander, instigating violence and posing a national security threat may all be disallowed – though in each instance there needs to be a proper case made that the relevant descriptor in fact applies. By and large however, the dictum attributed to Voltaire seems apt: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' An attitude of impartiality is if nothing else tactically useful if one is defending free speech; for that freedom extends even to false and/or silly beliefs.

If our concern is free speech, however, it will be relevant to our thinking on the matter that a certain belief – or better, ideology – itself embodies or encourages a motivation to suppress or hinder free discussion. And there is a

case to be made that current trans-activist ideology, or one prominent form of it, is such an ideology. To allege this of course is *not* to call for its suppression – obviously! But if you're e.g. concerned about illiberal tendencies within a university you'll be concerned about the official pushing of any ideology that embodies such a motivation.

Thus official declarations of the importance of free speech, such as those made by our V-C, however welcome they are, will be undermined or thrown into doubt by declarations coming from elsewhere in the hierarchy that show support for the sort of ideology which tends itself to be inimical to free speech. Symptoms that an ideology suffers from this tendency include: (a) a vocabulary of words and phrases such as 'hateful', 'harm', 'exclusionary', etc. (b) a felt need to protect certain views from the glare of empirical evidence, rational criticism, etc.

Two features of the vocabulary I've mentioned under (a) are relevant. First, the use of words as weapons – tools for denouncing, vilifying, and ultimately persecuting those deemed to be heretics or infidels. Second, the perversion of ordinary meanings: to say a man can't become a woman is to express *hatred* of trans women; to say that the question who you prefer to sleep with shouldn't be conflated with the question what type of person you identify as is to *exclude* trans people from the LGBTQ+ community (as the self-gluee activist managed to say about Stock when she was being talked over by Piers Morgan on his show *Piers Morgan Uncensored*)<sup>2</sup>. At the extreme end, to prohibit trans women from competing in women's cycling events is to *further genocide* (as cyclist Emily Bridges put it).

As for (b), the felt need to protect a view from the glare of empirical evidence, rational criticism, etc., it is natural to suppose that a fierce unwillingness to be presented with potential problems for your view has the usual and obvious motivation. Chants of 'No Debate' are already indicative. Socratic questioning ought to be an antidote but just as such questioning got Socrates himself into trouble it can also get gender-critical feminists into trouble. Consider *What is a woman?* When Posie Parker answers her own question with 'An adult human female' all hell breaks loose, though why what goes for 'woman' doesn't go for 'female' is unclear. (Can't I *identify as* female?)

And what does it mean to say that a trans woman is a woman? The two terms aren't meant to be equivalent, since (presumably) Kathleen Stock isn't a trans woman. Is it this: a trans woman is a biological man who identifies as.... As what? A biological woman? After all, you're not going to explain 'trans woman' by saying 'a biological man who identifies as a trans woman'. But 'A trans woman is a woman' can't mean 'A trans woman is a biological woman', since a biological man isn't a biological woman. So perhaps 'woman' can signify a certain *gender* – not a biological sex but rather something like a set of behaviours, inclinations, feelings: a 'sense of self', as it's called. So a trans woman is a biological man with that sense of



self. And ‘A trans woman is a woman’ = ‘A biological man with such-and-such sense of self has such-and-such sense of self.’ Stock and Parker will not deny this. (Who would?) What they’ll resist is the demand that they and others use ‘woman’ in this novel way. That is a piece of linguistic authoritarianism and its roots arguably lie in the strong desire to say ‘I am a woman’ as that might have been uttered *prior* to the new linguistic recommendations. This is the desire, heartfelt and serious, characteristic of gender dysphoria in males. To refit this desire for use in an ideological battle is to traduce people with gender dysphoria.

\* \* \*

Again and again commentators have depicted Stock and other gender-critical feminists as being party to a debate in which both sides occupy an ‘extreme’ position, that being the explanation for why there seems so little prospect of the two sides’ agreeing. It would be salutary for such commentators to undergo some of the Socratic questioning sketched above. Entertainer and former politician Ed Balls, interviewing Stock on *Good Morning Britain*, cast her in this light as an extremist opposing other extremists.<sup>3</sup> The majority of people, he averred, occupy the extensive middle ground. Stock was gentle with him and the extent of her Socratic questioning was to ask

how he knew what the majority of people thought. ‘I think I do know what most people think’, he replied helpfully.

Well, it’s only Ed Balls! Because of their experience of and contribution to proceedings in the House of Commons many MPs and former MPs have only a rudimentary notion of reasoned debate. There can also be an instinct to position yourself as a ‘moderate’ in a given debate; this instinct is found more generally among officials. And it has after all a certain pragmatic justification in those situations where a practical consensus has to be forged. But to know what the opposing positions *are*, which if any are ‘extreme’, which make sense or are reasonable in the light of the facts – to know all these things requires more than mere pragmatism or even-handedness. It requires intellectual honesty and genuine (not specious) humanity. Those are qualities which Kathleen Stock enjoys in abundance. Oxford did well to platform her.

<sup>1</sup> [https://unherd.com/2023/06/the-oxford-kids-are-alright/?tl\\_inbound=1&tl\\_groups\[0\]=18743&tl\\_period\\_type=3&mc\\_cid=f3a5bf4c68&mc\\_eid=129cb18e15](https://unherd.com/2023/06/the-oxford-kids-are-alright/?tl_inbound=1&tl_groups[0]=18743&tl_period_type=3&mc_cid=f3a5bf4c68&mc_eid=129cb18e15)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae3x22zzg9Y&t=675s>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auP1nhrZ4Mo&t=424s>

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## haiku

the children left me  
origami butterflies  
spreading their wings

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## Needlework

Have we forgotten the art  
of mending  
in our throwaway world –

in old Japan they used  
a kind of stitching, *sashiko*  
meaning little stabs –

neat running stitches  
on the outside  
and meant to be seen –

sometimes an indigo work jacket  
would carry a cloud  
an apron, a leaf –

oh, that we might mend  
so beautifully  
ourselves

SUE LEIGH

Sue Leigh’s second collection of poems, *Her Orchards*, was published by Two Rivers Press in 2021. She is currently working on a book with the Cornish painter, Alice Mumford.

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## Proof by Contradiction of My Existence

The theorem is that I exist. So  
suppose that I do not. That I am as baseless as  
the memory of a leaf in summer, half-sunk in a puddle where  
I have no right to be.

Suppose that the memory of a leaf is  
adequate proof for its existence.  
To be remembered is to be real. After all, they say you only  
die once  
nobody is left to remember you.

My grandfather is accordingly alive. His books are filled  
with pressed flowers, dried-out leaves of ash and maple,  
browned and skeletal after all these years.  
Little notes beside them are faded in the margins, blue  
fountain pen  
hardier than the colour of the marigolds.

Some pages, the thinnest ones, have only the faint traces  
of the hibiscus and lavender that once were there. The  
smallest memory of purple and blue, too faint to notice  
if you weren't looking for them.

Isn't the memory of a leaf the memory of my grandfather?  
If I remember both, then they must exist,  
and, therefore, so must I.

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## Anatomy of the Heart

Passion is the flame and therefore the flame is  
red, like the roses in the shops on Valentine's day, like the  
colour of an anatomical heart. Not like the icy blue of the  
Bunsen burner

that we used back in secondary school.

Passion is the aorta, and the left atrium, the left ventricle,  
the chordae tendinae. In biology, second period, we pulled  
on them

trying to make them snap. Tugged on the heartstrings, if  
you will.

They didn't give, and in many ways that makes  
perfect sense, since we all love and lose and linger on  
don't we?

So if the anatomical heart is as red as the Bunsen flame is not,  
and if we take this to be true,  
and if we know that without a working one we cannot  
survive, because a blue heart is a starved heart,  
then why does mine burn anoxic,  
if I am so determinedly here?

LISA HANA DELANEY

Lisa Hana Delaney is an 18-year-old undergraduate student reading English  
at the University of Cambridge. She has previously had work published  
in *The Hyacinth Review* and recognised by *Modern Language Quarterly*, as  
well as publications in several university magazines. When she isn't in Cam-  
bridge, she likes to sit by the sea in England's sunniest south-eastern corner  
and listen to Jean-Michel Jarre.

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## Taste of Childhood

Listerine is a luminescent beauty in a bottle.  
The taste of childhood swished around your gap-toothed  
mouth and  
a motherly voice that tells you to spit. An essential innocence  
of the kind that is lost around the time that your braces come  
off,  
worldly self-awareness growing in like  
that first adult tooth when you were seven.  
To be young is to crave. To crave  
is to ache like the first day of those braces in the soul  
as you shift and change.  
Tasting difference. Minty-fresh youth. Swish and spit

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# Fruits of History?

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PETER OPPENHEIMER

It is fully twenty years since the appearance of Philip Bobbitt's formidable, 900-page volume, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*. The author, an international lawyer and bipartisan adviser to US administrations, based at the University of Texas but also with strong academic links in Britain (at Oxford and King's College, London), has an evident and irresistible appreciation both of long-run historical movements and of fine literature. He confronts us with the text not merely of W.H. Auden's famous poem, but of the section of Homer's *Iliad* on which it is based, together with numerous other poets from John Milton to Philip Larkin, as well as non-English verse in translation.

As to the sweep of history, his theme is the interplay – from the Middle Ages onwards, in Europe and to some extent the wider world – of strategy and technology for one part, state constitutional developments for the other. War, in this scheme of things, is not an aberration but an intrinsic recurring element of human existence. Defining an epochal war as one “that challenges and ultimately changes the basic constitutional structure of the State”, Bobbitt traces a pattern in which periods of epochal warfare are punctuated, and sometimes terminated, by ambitious peace settlements which define a system of inter-State relations for the succeeding decades.

Laudably and boldly, Bobbitt does not confine himself to the distant past. He carries the discussion not just to the final decade of the twentieth century, but into the invisible depths of the twenty-first, sketching a number of possible “scenarios” along lines pioneered in the business world by Royal Dutch-Shell. (Surprisingly, while highlighting his debt to Shell, he makes no mention of the two individuals who chiefly originated the scenario-building methodology within that corporation – the Frenchman Pierre Wack and the Argentinian Brit, Ted Newland). Without seeking to emulate Bobbitt's futurology, one can reasonably ask whether his assessment of current events has stood – or is standing – the test of time.

The period from the onset of World War I to 1990 he labels “The Long War”. By the end of it, he observes, a whole clutch of factors had caused nation states to become “market states”, their responsibility for the well-being of citizens undiminished, but their scope for effective action now complicated and constrained by numerous major transformations. These are headed by weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, biological) and their diffusion, not merely across states but potentially to terrorist and criminal groupings. Weapons aside, key factors are the global spread and fragmentation of industrial output, together with the rise of the multi-national corporation and the liberalisation of money and capital markets – all of which give private agents increased leverage or bargaining power vis-à-vis national governments. Such globalisation of the civil economy, be it noted, had its early phase in the half-century before 1914, when the public sector represented a minimal percentage of national econ-

omies; a century later both globalisation and the public sector were making hugely increased demands on the economic system and, by the same token, on government policies to steer it and to mediate among competing claims.

That 1914 saw the start of something which Bobbitt calls “The Long War” – and which put an end to the concert of nation-states dating from the Congress of Vienna of 1815 – is not controversial. The only disputable matter is how far, if at all, Germany's responsibility for initiating it fell short of 100 percent (as demonstrated by the German historian Fritz Fischer). Altogether flimsy, on the other hand, is Bobbitt's claim that this Long War was concluded in 1990, with something called the Peace of Paris. In a word, the Soviet Union under Mr. Gorbachev withdrew from its erstwhile East European satellites, among other things permitting the reunification of Germany. This, according to Bobbitt, was necessary and sufficient to seal the triumph of the parliamentary nation state over its authoritarian enemies, fascism and communism.

One might argue, however, that an undue focus on formalities, plus a relative neglect of the long-term history of Russia, led Bobbitt to first miss the boat and then jump the gun. The Peace of Paris was shortly followed by the break-up of the Soviet Union into its constituent republics. This initiated in the Russian Federation an eastern simulacrum of the Weimar Republic – which lasted little more than a decade before giving way to a revival of Russian imperialist authoritarianism and war-mongering. One result was recruitment to NATO not merely of former Warsaw Pact members including the Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but also the previously neutral states of Finland and Sweden. Vladimir Putin's regime owes little to Karl Marx, but a great deal to Russia's Tatar or Mongol inheritance, to Ivan the Terrible and to Peter the Great. As witness Russia's ambition to reabsorb Ukraine, beginning with the Crimea in 2014 and following up with the “special military operation” against the rest of the country from February 2022 onwards.

Interestingly, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has for the first time imparted a strategic or political dimension to the BRICS entity. This acronym was devised in 2001 – just before the publication of Bobbitt's *magnum opus* – by Jim O'Neill, then chief economist at Goldman Sachs, to refer to the major emerging economies likely by 2050 to constitute a dominant share of world GDP: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa. At the outset it was just the first four, South Africa being added in 2010. Strikingly, all the non-Russia members of the group are currently neutral or somewhat supportive of Russia's Ukraine objectives, rather than siding with the NATO position of defending Ukraine's independence. It would be wrong, however, to make too much of this. Russia's current supporters also include major states in the Middle East – Turkey (itself a NATO member!), Iran, Syria, to name only the most obvious. And China doubtless has in mind its claim on Taiwan, not to mention its incipient

territorial rivalries with Russia around the Ussuri River and other locations in Eastern Siberia.

One other comment suggests itself at this stage. Bobbitt warns about the dangers inherent in the nation state's loss of control and its vulnerability or subjection to miscellaneous sectional forces. His book appeared in the wake of 9/11 – the bin Laden/Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. Not merely reviewers but the late Sir Michael Howard in his Foreword spoke of this event imparting a “horrible reality to Bobbitt’s description of the possibilities that now lie before us”. How probable are such possibilities? The challenge is to maintain not a complacent view but a balanced one. This should include two things about 9/11. First, it involved no weapons of mass destruction, “merely” the hijacking of passenger aircraft for a gruesome suicide mission. Secondly, it did not initiate a series: the organisers were patiently hunted down and eliminated by the US authorities, as indeed have been some of their Al Qaeda successors.

Further, a balanced view will acknowledge that new scope for private initiatives may also bring innovative benefits – as in the case of Bellinccat, the private intelligence organisation founded by Eliot Higgins, which *inter alia* identified the state authorities responsible for shooting down Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine in 2014 (with the loss of 300 lives). See the writer’s review of Higgins’ book on Bellinccat in *Oxford Magazine*, No.433, Fifth Week, Trinity Term 2021.

Michael Howard judged that *The Shield of Achilles* is unlikely to encounter the same fate as Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, “which scared us witless in the 1930s and is now deservedly forgotten.” Apart from anything else, Bobbitt’s work lends itself to piecemeal revision or supplementation, so one may hope for an updated edition. Often mentioned in the same breath as Spengler, a yet more gigantic work on which it has been difficult to make any sort of judgement is Arnold Toynbee’s multi-volume, *A Study of History*. I can appropriately close with a limerick which, if I remember rightly, was a prize-winning entry to a verse competition in one of the British weeklies.

*It’s hard when confronted with Toynbee  
To pay him back in his own coin be-  
cause proving him wrong  
Would take far too long,  
But how would a kick in the groin be?*

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## Three for the Road

### Fogmare

Suddenly night: vanished the frosty glitter  
kindling bare woodland limbs, barbed-wiry bramble  
and fallows ridgy under air-blue porcelain  
floral with jet-trails. Our straining headlamps fumble  
through fumes that fire alarm to my brain.  
I am guideless Dante in a circle too obscure  
for name, Samson in ignominious murk  
gripping the wheel. The engine’s baffled rumble  
drowns a heartbeat that seems no longer mine,  
the lambs dream-pastoral in a world of work,  
distant the moulded hills as love’s primal scar,  
the rooks’ cries a derisive spectral titter  
from some slow-receding childhood shoreline.  
Is to be dead like this? Suddenly light  
as bladed gables summoned from honey-stone  
slice through the dark, solid and sweet and bright.

### Motorway Vision

On the off-side I see an axe-face flier  
a death-mask hold the right  
cold, immobile, pricking my heart to wish  
I were groping down a foggy country road  
some thick-leaved elsewhere under October night  
so you sat next me, blanking the stern chess-player,  
oblivious of my near-side Ugolino,  
feeling the contours of our silent journey  
in concert till the flood-lit junction comes  
in view and we shift down to our last halt.

### Mind the Gap

It was nearly two feet wide. Peering down  
I saw cherry-blossom brown-edged beneath the train.  
You were inside with my closest friend, both smiling,  
keeping my seat safe in the crowded carriage.  
I hesitated, then jumped and took my place.  
But it was waning, the gleam on your glad image  
that never was, like evening-red of winter.

Alone, alive, I stirred, chill from my sleep.

Under stiff earth two hyacinth bulbs were waking  
ready to sprout, tensed for their ancient summons  
while I dreamed, cramped in novel vacancy.  
The comely and the amiable I encounter  
will seem mud brick to your gold-mosaic faces;  
daybreak will yawn and lenten twilight maunder  
as I mend broken spines, my rear defences

brazed with their gilt-edged motto: *mind the gap*.

CARL SCHMIDT

Carl Schmidt was formerly Senior English Tutor and is now Emeritus Fellow at Balliol College. His last book was *Passion and Precision: Collected Essays on English Poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer to Geoffrey Hill* (2015).

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# The Oxford Recitations

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SAM BURCHER

In the spring of 1923, the future Poet Laureate John Masefield made an announcement to *The Times* that he would be holding a verse speaking contest at Oxford. Masefield, an orphan sent away to sea at sixteen and almost shipwrecked, had used his awe-inspiring voyages to inform much of his early writing. Now, his plan was to discover a raft of beautiful speakers passionate about poetry to create a mainstream tradition for its performance.

As the principal organisers of the contest, John Masefield and his wife Constance sought help from their circle at Oxford. Gilbert Murray, the Regius Professor of Greek, George Gordon, a Professor of English Literature, Sir Herbert Warren, the President of Magdalen, and two winners of the Newdigate Prize: Laurence Binyon and Heathcote Garrod, a Professor of Poetry, all agreed to act as judges. George Gordon named the two day festival 'The Oxford Recitations', and gave the opening speech at the Examination Schools on July 26th 1923.

Over five hundred contestants entered, exceeding all expectations. But, after hearing the first dozen or so speakers, John Masefield wondered whether he had made a mistake in pushing for the contest, when a young woman began to speak in a way that made him hold his breath. He later recalled, "I had heard nothing like it. What I had not imagined was the power of such speech upon an audience, which sat as if in a trance."



Diana Homer

A recital by Diana Homer, the daughter of the Unitarian Minister F.A. Homer, would have a similar effect upon John Masefield. Diana was my grandmother, then a teenager drawn to Oxford with a headful of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton set by the judges as test poems in the syllabus mailed ahead of the competition. She would be a constant winner in the women's division until 1929. More about that later.

On the whole, the first year of the Recitations revealed impressive talent and application. Each judge selected two favourites from amongst the trained speakers, talented amateurs, up and coming actors and students competing in the lyric, dramatic and narrative classes to battle it out in the Oxford Prize Class Finals. Highly coveted silver and bronze medals were awarded to the first and second place men and women with prizes of around £200 in today's money for the exceptional speakers.

The contest took place at the Schools from morning until late into the evening. Door stewards ensured the recitals went undisturbed and prevented the audience from questioning the judges about their decisions or asking them for autographs. Clapping was restrained during the day in case of exams elsewhere in the building, but on Finals night the crowd was roused into rip-roaring song,

ending with a resounding, "Three cheers for Mr and Mrs Masefield!"

## *A Choir of Nightingales*

John Masefield was guided by the revolutionary impulse of W.B. Yeats, whose lecture in Lincoln's Inn on new ways of speaking poetry he attended as a young man in 1901. Yeats's methods, with the emphasis on the vowels and the beats, was a step towards realising the poet's intention and a challenge to the stuffy Victorian drawing room approach to recitation.

By 1924, Masefield had resolved the earlier problems of contestants shrieking, whispering, going prone or falling off the stage. A third day was added and most speakers were displaying the poems with their voices rather than outlandish gestures. He declared the effect of probably the best speakers in these islands gathered together was that of "A choir of nightingales." The excitement and delight of the poetry touched all present with a new feeling for poetry and a new understanding of the principle of speaking it.

The judges were keen to attract males, outnumbered five to one by females. And, their note in the syllabus expressed an explicit bias: "Poetry at its best being made by men, is best spoken by men ... Whenever poetry has been a popular delight the voices of men have made it so." However, this was not the perspective of the many observers of the Recitations. In 1927, *The Times* reported: "Beautiful as the men's test piece, taken from Laurence Binyon's translation of *Dante's Inferno* was, the lines spoken by the women, which comes from the same source, will perhaps remain longer in the memory." Adding, "The depth of the men's voices was their main fascination, but we fancied that the women's enunciation was clearer."

A ringing bell summoned Diana Homer, just nineteen years old, to the stage. Her recitation of a part of *Samson Agonistes* caught the ear of John Masefield in his customary white dress suit, black socks and shoes and a pink carnation buttonhole, alongside Constance in her gold sandals. After three days of competition, Diana won the Oxford Prize for *The Best and Most Beautiful Individual Piece of Speech*. Three years later in 1928, Milton's poem was amongst His Master's Voice (HMV) first ever 78rpm recordings of verse using the voice of Clifford Turner, a prior winner of the men's contest.

In 1927, Margery Bryce, an actor and a member of the Women's Socialist Party Union (WSPU) entered the contest. Her teenage activism perhaps had some influence on the vote given to all women the following year. Bryce had led a 40,000 strong Suffrage procession through London in 1911 on a white horse bearing the WSPU banner, wearing the battledress of Joan of Arc. Her embodiment of the spirit of St Joan, canonised in 1920, exemplified the courage of the women's movement. Bryce was praised by all

the judges for *Hellas: Chorus* by Shelley. She participated again in the 1928 Recitations.

Alistair Sim, then a Fulton Lecturer in Elocution at New College, Edinburgh, shone brightly at Oxford, where his love of poetry and talent for speech was a winning combination. Sim and Homer dominated the men's and women's recitals between 1924-1929. In 1926, when the poet Walter de la Mare and the poetry publisher Harold Munro joined the judges, Sim won the bronze medal and classes 1 and 2 and Homer won class 2. Two years on, with the addition of the poet-judge Lascelles Abercrombie, Diana Homer won the bronze medal and class 3, beating Margery Bryce into second place.

Through his involvement with the Oxford Recitations, Alistair Sim became one of Britain's finest and funniest character actors. Under the guidance of John Masefield's friend the playwright and poet John Drinkwater, Sim found stage success and was later the star of over fifty films. He is perhaps best known as Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* (1951), and for the dual roles of Clarence and his twin sister Miss Fritton, the hapless headmistress of the unruly girls in *The Belles of St Trinians* (1954). In *The Green Man* (1956) Sim mimics John Masefield's habit of popping a carnation into his buttonhole.

### *The Flowers of Speech*



John Laurie

In the main, the contest was producing a flowering rather than a withering effect. John Laurie, a notable actor fresh out of drama school in 1923, made an impression on all present. Laurence Binyon remarked, "Is not John Laurie the best of a mixed bag, he knows what to do with verse." Laurie would later complain he was considered to be the finest speaker of verse in this country, and yet became famous for doing, "this rubbish." Laurie is, of course, referring to *Dad's Army*, in

which he plays the disgruntled Private Frazer, part of a bungling troop of British Home Guards. His distinctive rolling of the letter r was likely a mannerism he borrowed from the poet Ezra Pound to make his catchphrase, "We're doomed, doomed," all the more memorable.

Alfred Hitchcock cast John Laurie in a supporting role to Robert Donat as the spy Major General Richard Hannay in his film version of *The 39 Steps* (1935), a novel written twenty years earlier by the politician John Buchan, listed as a judge in 1927. By coincidence, Robert Donat also had a connection to the Oxford Recitations, first entering in 1923 as a teenager overcoming a stutter. He was then an elocution student of the Unitarian Minister James Bernard, who helped Donat make his debut as Lucius in *Julius Caesar* at the Prince of Wales, Birmingham in 1921, aged 16. Donat returned to Oxford in 1929 to take part in John Masefield's verse dramas at his home theatre on Boars Hill.

### *Voices From A Poets Garden*

It was quite something to be invited up the hill to Masefield's theatre set amongst the lovely flowers, hedges and trees in his garden. Word of his beautiful voices was spreading, *The Evening News* reporting: "You do not know how enjoyable poetry can be until you have heard it from the lips of a Masefield Finalist." And, in 1926, the recently formed BBC sent its talent scouts to Masefield's door for a list of his best speakers.

At the 1929 Recitations, there were no judges, just "helpers," reflecting Masefield's desire to eliminate the competitive element, which he had grown to dislike. Alongside his favourite poems he commissioned new poems and verse plays by several poet-judges for two days of recital. The performances served as a testbed for the poet's new works to be published shortly afterwards. The sixteen speakers he invited to demonstrate the art of beautiful speech included Diana Homer, Alistair Sim, Robert Donat and Rose Bruford, who, although not a prize winner at Oxford, would later found her prestigious theatre school under Masefield's influential patronage.

Amongst the helpers were the Bloomsbury poet Robert Trevelyan, father of the Surrealist painter and poet Julian Trevelyan, and Henry Nevinston, the father of the prominent war artist C.W. Nevinston. Henry Nevinston was a war correspondent who helped to found the Friends Ambulance Service during the First World War. Father and son ferried the wounded to the disused warehouses in Dunkirk known as The Shambles. Still healing from the traumas of war, Henry bitterly complained the speakers came from the middle classes until he became visibly moved by the transcendence of one woman's speech.

### *The Oxford Festival and Summer Diversions*



John Masefield

In 1930, John Masefield's appointment to Poet Laureate effectively forced his retirement from the Recitations. Laurence Binyon took charge by swiftly reinstating the competition he renamed *The Oxford Festival of Spoken Verse* and briefly joining forces with the English Verse Speaking Association. Tensions between Binyon and Masefield appeared to reach breaking point in 1937 when Masefield launched his non-competitive *Oxford Summer Diversions* with Merton Professor Neville Coghill.

J.R.R. Tolkien was invited to recite Chaucer's *The Reeve's Tale*, and in the following year, *The Knight's Tale*, which he did entirely from memory with his ten year daughter in the audience.

The perception of rivalry between Binyon and Masefield went back to 1913, when both men were tipped for Poet Laureate, with Masefield finally succeeding on the death of Robert Bridges. Over time, Binyon's emotive poem *For The Fallen* (1914) had become the centrepiece of the worldwide Anzac and Memorial Day services, which started in 1918, and was the inspiration for Elgar's



*Spirit of England Suite* (1917). Despite Binyon's fellow judges's pleas to hold a joint evening with Masfield's Divisions, at a packed Rhodes House, he opted to keep the two events separate, saying the two men were complimentary to each other.

The poems selected for The Oxford Festival were intended to be brief enough to save the audience and the judges from boredom. But not all of the judges considered themselves entertained. In 1937 the playwright Clifford Bax wrote to the organisers begging to resign his post:

*"I cannot come to Oxford next year. I CANNOT ENDURE IT! I cannot endure to hear the same poems over and over again."*

T.S. Eliot politely refused his invitation to be a judge at Oxford in 1935. He responded:

*"I do not feel, however, that I am qualified to be a judge at such competitions, and it is a task from which I beg to be excused."*

However, in private, Eliot railed against the idea of public poetry recitals, saying: "The English Verse Speaking Association is a monstrous cancer in this land stretching now its foul tentacles towards the public house." Where, he demanded, is a man to go for a drink?

In 1937 W.H. Auden, Vita Sackville West, the inspiration for Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), and Cecil Day

Lewis, the father of the actor Daniel Day Lewis, joined the judges. Binyon declared Auden and Sackville West to be real acquisitions; both keen, working hard and giving detailed criticism. His praise for Auden was unbridled, and by all accounts everyone was getting along with him. Binyon's sentiments are echoed by probably the last living competitor of the Festival, now in her 102nd year. Whilst having no memory of the poetry she recited, Nona Nivea-Dashwood remembers Auden as a handsome and charismatic fellow.

The last Oxford Festival took place in 1939, coinciding with the onset of the Second World War and the death of W.B. Yeats. Sadly, Diana Homer died a young woman in tragic circumstances in 1941. And, when the death of Laurence Binyon in 1943 left the contest rudderless, Cecil Day Lewis came to the rescue, transforming it into 'The English Festival of Spoken Verse', held in London after the war. John Masfield continued to encourage the development of spoken poetry until the end of his life in 1967. He was succeeded as Poet Laureate by Cecil Day Lewis.



Laurence Binyon by William Strang

## How to initiate Congregation actions

### *How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation*

It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (*i.e.* a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8<sup>th</sup> day before the meeting.

### *Questions and replies*

Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18<sup>th</sup> day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in *Gazette* in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

### *Postal votes*

Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present ("on the floor") at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6<sup>th</sup> day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

### *Flysheets*

To generate a flysheet for publication with the *Gazette*, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml>

Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the *Gazette*.

The Congregation website is at: [www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation).

Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: [congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk)).

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## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

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